

ADE DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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Redfield council to consider helping with school effort (Pine Bluff Commercial)

REDFIELD — The Redfield City Council agreed during a called a meeting Tuesday evening to meet again in one week in an effort to determine if the municipality can play a role in keeping Redfield Middle School open or help with the development of a charter school.

City Attorney Margaret Dobson said she did some preliminary legal research at the request of Mayor Tony Lawhon and determined the municipality could help fund legal action, but only if the city is the legal client of an attorney hired for the work.

Education law is a specialized field, she noted, and outside the scope of her legal practice.

Aldermen Larry O'Briant, Darrell Hedden and Glen Flemmons initiated the called meeting to determine what action, if any, the city could take.

The Keep Redfield Middle School Task Force asked Redfield residents Jan. 17 for support and direction on keeping the school open in the wake of the White Hall School Board's Jan. 8 decision to close the Redfield school at the end of the current school year.

Todd Dobbins, chairman of the task force, said there are two viable options: Fight the closure by contending the school board took the action to block integration and opening a charter school. The latter is probably the most practical step if state officials agree to waive the deadline for filing for an open charter school, he added.

Task force representatives are meeting Friday with state Education Commissioner Tom Kimbrell to make a pitch for waiving the deadline, Dobbins said.

Hedden earlier said he had hoped the task force would hire an attorney early in the campaign to keep the middle school open.

If the middle school is closed, the community expects the White Hall district to turn the building over to the municipality for use by local residents "with no strings attached," Hedden said recently.

Dobbins said Redfield will need a building to house an open enrollment charter school, but believes the White Hall district would oppose use of the building for a charter school.

City officials were asked to speak with the school board about releasing the building to the municipality once the school is formally closed.

Other options discussed Tuesday included seeking an injunction if a court to reverse the closure of the Redfield school and seeking approval for the former Redfield School District to withdraw from the 1950 merger with the White Hall district.

A legal fight could prove costly and time consuming, Dobbins said the task force has determined.

Lawhon suggested the 7 p.m. special council meeting on Tuesday to resolve any questions not answered during Tuesday's called meeting.

UPDATE: The charter school bandwagon arrives (Arkansas Times Blog)

Just in time for the charter school rally to be led this morning by Walmart billionaire Jim Walton and Arkansas Democrat-Gazette publisher Walter Hussman, among others, comes a timely news article from, where else, the Democrat-Gazette, on Arkansas's fall in ranking by a charter school advocacy group.

The group emphasizes that Arkansas has fallen to 25th in its ranking of beneficial climate for these quasi-private schools run with public tax dollars. But that's mostly because other states, under the sway of similar fatcat lobbying efforts, have gotten even charter friendlier.

Not to worry, the anti-public school group has a recipe for improving Arkansas's charter school stature that — another coincidence! — happens to be a mirror image of the Walton plan for making another big leap forward in this legislative session toward the privatization of American education. Some of the legislation has already been introduced. More to come.

The group noted that Arkansas could improve its ranking by "creating additional authorizing options, increasing operational autonomy, ensuring equitable operational funding and equitable access to capital funding and facilities, and enacting statutory guidelines for relationships between public charter schools and educational service providers."

More charter schools. Less state oversight. State tax dollars to build buildings, even if they duplicate existing buildings in many Arkansas communities. "Guidelines for educational service providers?" I'm guessing that isn't to facilitate contractual relationships with school teachers.

UPDATE: Twitter photos from the school rally show about 150 people, counting press and assorted bystanders, at the Capitol rotunda this morning. This, after robocalls, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette advertising, incessant Twitter and Facebook messaging, mail appeals and more. The Walton billions haven't fully fertilized the grassroots just yet, apparently.

UPDATE II: David Koon reports on the morning rally. Bush invoked the 1957 school crisis at Central High.

I wish the goal was achieved when those children attended their first class. unfortunately it was not. Inequality just became easily hidden and therefore overlooked, hidden in low-income neighborhoods We allowed this to happen because of the soft bigotry of low expectations as my brother talked about.

He said access to quality education was the "civil rights issue of our time." He talked glowingly of the KIPP charter schools in the Delta. "Schools like KIPP show what is possible and they provide depressing evidence of how millions of children have been left behind over the years because they weren't afforded the same opportunities."

He said he hopes people of Arkansas would send a message to "the masters of delay and deferral." Choose, he said. "You have a choice. You can either help the politically powerful groups or you can help the next generation

of Americans." Waltons and Bushes are not the politically powerful to whom he referred, of course. Presumably he referred to teacher groups.

UPDATE III: I'm hearing that a centerpiece of the Billionaire Boys Club agenda — to strip the state Board of Education of regulatory authority over charter schools — is running into stout opposition in the House. Despite all the money and all the tub-thumping and all the campaign spending, it turns out others with interest in schools, particularly people in the ground in small school districts, know how to reach the ears of legislators, too. They'll be talking at a news conference Wednesday afternoon by the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign.

School-rally crowd hears call for 'new' (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush joined charter-school supporters at the Capitol rotunda Tuesday morning before a meeting with business leaders and community advocates about creating more school-choice options.

Children and adult advocates wore yellow shirts and waved signs with slogans such as "I yearn to learn" while listening to Bush.

"Our children can't wait for plodding, incremental change. We need disruptive change, we need to invest in new ideas, new approaches in education and that means creating more options for parents, more competition in schools," Bush said at an event organized by A+ Arkansas, a coalition that supports expanded school options. "Public monopolies operate for the adults in the system and not for the kids."

Bush called improving education the civil-rights and "economic issue of our time."

"Fifty years after the Little Rock Nine our most disadvantaged kids are the ones least likely to receive a quality education and they are the ones who need it the most," Bush said. "Without an equal education there is no such thing as equality."

Lawmakers are expected to consider changes to charter schools and other school options during the 2013 legislative session.

House Bill 1040 by Rep. Mark Biviano, R-Searcy, would create a five-member charter-school commission to review, authorize and monitor contracts of all public charter schools.

The governor, Senate president pro tempore, House speaker, the chairman of the House Education Committee and the chairman of the Senate Education Committee would appoint one member each to the commission.

The governor appoints the nine-member state Board of Education, which has authority for charter schools.

SCHOOL-CHOICE PANELS

On Tuesday afternoon, the A+ Arkansas group hosted an "Education Summit" at the Doubletree Hotel that featured business leaders, lawmakers, educators and parent and community organizers. Participants spoke largely in support of charter schools and other forms of school choice.

William Dillard III, vice president of Dillard's Inc., told the crowd of about 450 people that part of his job is to get people to move to Arkansas, and education is a primary factor that families consider.

"Honestly, we're deficient in that regard and I have to work around that," he said, adding that competition in education is beneficial, just as competition is good in any endeavor.

"If there is competition among schools for kids, guess who wins? Kids and parents," he said. "This is a justice issue, particularly for these kids being failed by their existing schools. It is inherently unfair and wrong for every kid in America not to have a chance - if they apply themselves and if they try - to get ahead, and right now that is not happening."

Patrick Wolf, professor and 21st Century Endowed Chair in School Choice at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville, evaluates school choice and voucher programs and concluded both have value.

"We know that public charter schools deliver better educational outcomes for children under some very important conditions - so long as they are not brandnew schools," he said.

New charters struggle, but three to five years into their operation "they're clearly producing better outcomes for kids. That's particularly the case for highly disadvantaged kids and for kids living in urban environments where there are large concentrations of charter schools and parents have a lot of choices and can pick one best for their child.

Wolf called private- and taxpayer-funded vouchers for private school tuition, "a lifeline" for parents of disadvantaged urban students. Vouchers enable parents to send their children to already established, market-tested schools, he said.

Walter E. Hussman, Jr., publisher of the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette and chief executive officer of WEHCO Media Co., described efforts to open the three eStem Public Charter Schools in downtown Little Rock.

"EStem was created to serve lower-income minority kids," he said. "One problem we have in Little Rock is that we have a lot of minority kids that want to get into magnet schools but they can't get into magnet schools because there is a racial quota. We wanted to try to provide educational opportunities."

The 1,400-student schools now have 4,300 on waiting lists, he said.

"This just shows the demand for quality education," Hussman said. "This shows why we need more schools like eStem and why eStem should maybe be able to set up another campus."

T. Willard Fair, chief executive officer of the Urban League of Greater Miami Inc., and Georgia state Rep. Alisha Morgan offered some of the strongest advice.

Fair, who is black, said his work with Bush in Florida was key to the success of initiatives there. Fair was critical of black Arkansas lawmakers who attended Tuesday's luncheon but left before the panel discussion.

"It's disturbing to me. You can't talk about a movement that has the power to move things like this movement will move things if everybody is not involved," Fair said. "It is insulting," he said of what he saw as a refusal to participate. "It sends the wrong message to the children," he said.

Morgan, a Democrat, who is also black, advised the participants Tuesday to make the development of school options a bipartisan effort and not one dominated by Republicans. She urged that the members of both parties be involved in the crafting of legislation.

Jim Walton, chairman and chief executive officer of Arvest Bank Group Inc. and Luke Gordy, executive director of Arkansas for Educational Reform Foundation, spoke in support of a new charter commission.

Walton said a commission devoted solely to charter schools would be more knowledgeable about what works. The state Board of Education could concentrate on low-performing schools, he said.

Gordy said that the purpose of the new commission would not be to rubberstamp. Failure to approve high-quality charter schools would hurt the charter school movement, he said.

CAPITOL DEBATE

Biviano has said the state Board of Education has been slow to consider some charter-school applications and has denied some that should have been approved. Biviano said Tuesday's events with a keynote speaker like Bush should help his effort. But House Education Chairman James McLean, D-Batesville, said there are problems keeping Biviano's bill from moving forward.

"A lot of school board folks have some concerns with it, some educators have concerns, superintendents. I think he's trying to address those before he brings it to us," McLean said. "Two competing boards at the Department of Education: I don't know if that's really a positive development."

He said the state board has done a good job with charter schools and thinks concerns should be worked out with that board.

Biviano said he is working to educate members about what the charter board would do.

Gov. Mike Beebe, a Democrat, opposes the bill.

Today several education and community groups calling themselves the Arkansas Opportunity to Learn Campaign will hold a news conference at the Capitol about supporting traditional public education.

"We view the agenda of the A+ group as pretty extreme," said Bill Kopsky, executive director of the Arkansas Public Policy Panel. "We just view this as a distraction. They're interested in this radical ideology which we just don't think matches Arkansas. We're not anticharter school at all. What we are for is high-achieving public schools."

Hoxie teen had gun at school, police say (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

HOXIE — Police in Hoxie said a 16-year-old was arrested Tuesday after being found with an unloaded gun at school.

Police Chief Glen Smith told KAIT-TV that the Hoxie High School student was found with a single-shot pistol after another student saw the weapon and reported it to school officials. Smith said the teenager told police he had found the gun and forgot he had it with him.

Smith said the student surrendered the gun without incident and was arrested on a felony count of carrying a weapon onto school property before being turned over to authorities. State law prohibits the identification of youths charged with crimes.

College remediation rate drops again (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — The number of Arkansas students who entered the state's public colleges and universities unprepared for college-level course work fell in the fall of 2012 to 11,108 - or 47.8 percent of 23,240 first time students - continuing a steady trend of decline, a report released this week by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education said.

That number, called the remediation rate, beat the state's previous low rate of 48.5 percent, which it hit in 1994, the department said.

The rate measures first time students who scored below 19 in at least one area - math, English or reading - of the ACT college-admissions test and were required to complete noncredit, remedial course work in that area before continuing to traditional classes. The test has a maximum score of 36.

Despite declines, the state's remediation rate remains relatively high compared with those of many other states, and it demands continued attention, higher education leaders said.

"Hopefully, it would continue to go down," said Shane Broadway, interim director of the state Higher Education Department. "Obviously, that would be our hope."

A focus on assisting struggling students comes as the state's institutions work to improve graduation rates for all students and to enroll older adults who've never pursued a degree to help meet Gov. Mike Beebe's goal of doubling the number of Arkansas degree holders by 2025.

U.S. census data released last year show that Arkansas ranks second from the bottom in a state-by-state ranking of degree-holding adults in the latter half of the decade, with only 18.9 percent of residents older than 25 holding bachelor's degrees. That number was well below the 27.5 percent national average. Only West Virginia had fewer, with 17.1 percent.

"The longer someone does not pursue a higher education, the more likely they are to need to be remediated," Broadway said.

The rate is lower for students who attended high school more recently, according to the report, which the Higher Education Coordinating Board will review Friday. Of the 19,020 first-time college students whose 2012 enrollment fell within a year of their high school graduation, 40 percent needed remedial courses, the report said.

College and university leaders credited changes in the state's elementary and secondary education system for better preparing students for college, reducing the need for academic interventions.

Calvin Johnson, interim chancellor at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and a former state lawmaker, said efforts to raise academic standards and better fund the state's public school district have fueled recent improvements.

"I think we're really beginning to see results from that," he said.

UAPB had the highest remediation rate among four-year institutions, at 85.2 percent, down from 93.1 percent in 2008. The University of Arkansas at Fayetteville had the lowest rate, at 8.5 percent.

All of the state's colleges and universities have worked to redesign remedial curriculum and increase advising so that students who require extra academic assistance have a greater likelihood of graduating after completing the courses.

That's especially important at universities with open admissions policies, such as UAPB and the University of Arkansas at Monticello, Johnson said. Because those campuses admit students regardless of test scores or high school grades, they attract many first-generation students from low-income families, he said.

Those students often benefit from special summer programs, additional tutoring and in-dorm academic coaches, Johnson said. UAPB also makes special learning plans for students with ACT scores below 15.

"You might say, 'You shouldn't have to do these things,' but we know that it helps," Johnson said. "It's a challenge for us, but that's our mission, and we feel good when we are able to get those students on track."

Some universities, such as Arkansas Tech University, have seen a steady growth in remediation rates. The Russellville campus' 2012 entering class had a remediation rate of 50.6 percent, compared with 40.2 percent in 2008, the report said.

The rate has increased because of enrollment growth in Arkansas Tech's two-year programs, which are included in its overall rate, spokesman Sam Strasner said.

Some universities, such as Arkansas State University in Jonesboro and the University of Arkansas at Little Rock, have tightened admissions standards, leading to a drop in remediation rates.

In 2010, ASU required a grade-point average of at least a 2.5 and a minimum ACT score of 17 for unconditional admissions. Those requirements rose gradually. In 2014, the university is set to require a minimum grade-point average of 2.75 and an ACT score of at least 21 for unconditional admissions.

ASU's remediation rate dropped from 48.5 percent in 2008 to 30.4 percent in 2012, the report said.

Similarly, UALR has increased the standards it uses to admit students with a cumulative score lower than 21 on the ACT, tying their admissions to performance in certain high school courses.

Those new standards led to a remediation rate of 40.5 percent in 2012, down from 50.3 percent in 2008.

"That [new standard] was driven by the concern that students with academic preparation below some level have a very low prospect of success," UALR Chancellor Joel Anderson said. "They were coming, we were admitting them and then at the end of the semester they had a bad transcript that was a permanent burden - and they also typically would leave here with debt."

Under the new standards, UALR turns away some students it would have previously admitted, largely referring them to community colleges, he said.

Of the 8,393 community college students starting college for the first time in 2012, 74.2 percent required remediation in at least one subject, the report said. Of the 14,847 students starting four-year universities, 32.9 percent required remedial courses, it said.

"We can be optimistic that, both for us and for the state, that number will continue to go down," Anderson said. "The fundamental shaping factor is K-12."

School safety loses out – Editorial (Arkansas Democrat-Gazette)

LITTLE ROCK — "In the first place, God made idiots. This was for practice. Then He made school boards."

-Mark Twain MARK TWAIN also advised: When angry, count to four. And when very angry, swear. It's hard not to swear after reading the latest coming out of Little Rock's school board.

These people aren't thinking.

The superintendent of the state's largest school district-Morris Holmes-recommended a perfectly sensible plan to put more armed guards on school campuses. In the wake of the pre-Christmas shootings in Newtown, Conn., such a precaution only makes sense. And it has made sense for a long while now. Since at least 1998 and Jonesboro, Ark.

It makes so much sense that various schools around the state already have armed guards on campus, if not full-out, full-grown local police officers.

The cops make a little extra money, and the schools get a lot more protection. Even some of the schools in the Little Rock School District have such an arrangement. It isn't exactly new.

This proposal from Superintendent Holmes would have put an armed guard in each of the city's schools still without one. Plus provide the firearms, training, screening, psychological testing and other such requirements for any civilian guards who may not already be part of a police force.

The school board's response? Nah.

If that would have been all the board members said, it alone would have been enough to merit a good cussin'. But then a few members made it worse by trying to explain themselves. And wound up explaining the inexplicable-and defending the indefensible.

"I am not convinced that the deterrence that we gain in an elementary school outweighs the psychological sea change of kids having an armed person on campus," said Jody Carreiro.

Psychological sea-change? You wouldn't believe the psychological-and physical-sea change those kids might undergo if another, more-than-slightly unhinged and fully armed nutcase walked into a local school without a guard standing in his way.

And here is another member of the school board-Norma Johnson-on the same subject. Talk about the perfect being the enemy of the good, or just the sensible: She said one guard wouldn't be enough to ensure that a school is protected: "What happens when they are detained in another situation? We're talking about one person who has nobackup. I wouldn't take that job if it paid \$200,000 a year."

Ms. Johnson can relax. No sensible principal would hire her as a guard with an attitude like hers. As for the questions she raised, they may not be worth taking seriously, but we'll try:

1. What happens if the campus guard is detained in another situation? Well now, if the guard is scolding a boy for running in the hall, and hears shots in the playground, some folks would probably assume that "shots fired!" would get his attention-and shift his priorities. From just stopping a kid who's running down a hall to saving lives. Do we have to explain this? To an adult? To a member of a school board, for goshsakes? Yes, apparently we do.
2. No back-up for the guard? So zero security is better than some? In what world does that make sense?
3. Norma Johnson might not take a guard job for \$200,000 a year, but we imagine even a tenth of that amount might interest a fully qualified but currently unemployed security guard in these uncertain times.

HERE'S WHAT made this inane colloquy completely baffling: This is the same school board that pays half the salaries of 16 police officers to patrol all of its high schools and most of its middle schools. Don't the other schools deserve to be protected, too? Are little kids still in elementary school fair game, or what? Explain us that one. Tell us what the school board has against more school guards again.

Maybe it's that the school board doesn't mind police on campus, it just doesn't trust civilian guards. But if those guards were trained, screened and tested, they'd be a great asset to school safety, not to mention parents' peace of mind. Or just a deterrent to anybody who's staking out the place.

There's many an American family out there just now who wish they could turn the clock back and put a guard in a certain spot at a certain time. Those families are spread out from Arkansas to Colorado to Connecticut. And nobody wants to join that club.

According to one story, 86 percent of the parents who answered the Little Rock district's survey on the subject favored more security officers on campus-armed security officers. Eighty-six percent. And 72 percent of the schools' staffers, too. Sensible people.

Still, the school board's response was . . . Nah.

Let's remember its vote come the next school board election. Parents just got themselves an issue.